The Role of Supervisors' and Supervisees' Mindfulness in Clinical Supervision

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Abstract:

The authors explored whether supervisor and supervisee self-ratings of mindfulness (N = 72 supervision pairs) predicted perceptions of the supervisory relationship and session dynamics. Only supervisor self-ratings of mindfulness predicted their own ratings of the supervisory relationship and session dynamics.

Keywords: mindfulness | supervision | supervisory relationship

Article:

Counselors and counselor educators increasingly are attending to *mindfulness*, defined as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Mindfulness may contribute to a focused therapeutic presence during counseling sessions (Campbell & Christopher, 2012), which can foster client engagement and may contribute to a strong working relationship (Cashwell, Bentley, & Bigbee, 2007). Mindfulness can also energize the counselor psychologically, leading to an increased passion for the clinical work (Cashwell et al., 2007). As a clinical intervention, mindfulness-based programs (e.g., mindfulness-based stress reduction and cognitive therapy, dialectic behavior therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, and relapse prevention treatment) have produced significant, positive outcomes in clients' ratings of chronic pain, mood disturbance, anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms of stress (Baer, 2003). Similarly, mindfulness has produced a range of benefits for counselors outside the clinical setting, including enhanced mental and physical health, interpersonal relationships, and behavioral regulation (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007).

Such results suggest that mindfulness may be particularly relevant for counseling students because, developmentally, the students can exhibit anxiety, lack of confidence, and dependency on their supervisors (Borders & Brown, 2005). They often face chronic stress and anxiety both

personally, as they complete a rigorous educational experience, and professionally, as they begin to work with clients (Schure, Christopher, & Christopher, 2008). In an effort to prevent chronic stress and burnout in students, several counselor education programs have offered mindfulness-based training opportunities. In a prospective, cohort-controlled design study, Shapiro, Brown, and Biegel (2007) found higher levels of mindfulness correlated with significant declines in students' stress and state and trait anxiety, as well as increases in self-compassion. Similarly, master's students in a semester-long mindfulness-based course reported increased ability to cope with stressors and decreased anxiety (Campbell & Christopher, 2012; Newsome, Christopher, Dahlen, & Christopher, 2006; Schure et al., 2008). Qualitative themes across four cohorts of students in the semester-long course also pointed to substantial positive effects on students' counseling skills and therapeutic relationships, particularly an increased capacity for empathy and compassion (Newsome et al., 2006; Schure et al., 2008). These qualitative themes have been supported by quantitative studies in which higher supervisee mindfulness was positively associated with counselor self-efficacy (e.g., Greason & Cashwell, 2009; Wyatt, 2011).

Schure et al. (2008) speculated that students' enhanced mindfulness might contribute to supervision session dynamics (e.g., their ability to be more present, achieve more depth) and stronger connections with their supervisors. Such contributions to the supervisory relationship and process would have much importance, because the quality of the supervisor–supervisee relationship is the “heart and soul of the supervision experience” (Borders & Brown, 2005, p. 67) and pivotal to the learning process (Goodyear, 2014). In addition, supervision session dynamics have been linked to supervisee identification of best and worst supervision sessions, with the more helpful sessions having more depth and smoothness (e.g., Martin, Goodyear, & Newton, 1987). Thus, student supervisees' mindfulness might enhance supervision variables to promote a more productive supervision learning environment.

It is likely that both supervisors' and supervisees' mindfulness are important to consider, based on dyadic research conducted with counselor–client and supervisor–supervisee pairs. In a study measuring the perceptions of counselor–client dyads, Greason and Welfare (2013) found that college counselors' levels of mindfulness were positively and significantly related to their clients' perceptions of the working alliance and facilitative conditions within the therapeutic relationship. Similarly, in a quantitative study of 67 supervisee–supervisor dyads, White and Queener (2003) found that another supervisor characteristic, supervisor attachment style, had an impact on both supervisors' and supervisees' ratings of the working alliance. Thus, it might be expected that both supervisors' and supervisees' mindfulness would contribute to their perceptions of the supervisory relationship and their evaluations of session dynamics such as depth and smoothness.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of supervisors' and supervisees' mindfulness on several supervisory relationship and session dynamics variables within the supervision context. We sought to extend previous work on mindfulness in counseling in several ways. First, to date, only counselors' mindfulness has been studied, and it has been explored only in nonsupervision contexts. Second, we used dyadic data (paired ratings from supervisor–supervisee dyads) as a means of providing a more complex and accurate view of the concurrent

contributions of the variables to the supervision process. To date, qualitative inquiry has been the primary mode of investigating mindfulness in counselor training. We chose variables and quantitative assessment based on this information as well as the suggestions of Schure et al. (2008) regarding the potential influence of counselors' mindfulness on key supervision dynamics.

We addressed the following research question: What is the relationship between supervisor and supervisee mindfulness and ratings of the facilitative conditions of the supervisory relationship, the working alliance, and depth and smoothness of session? We studied two aspects of the supervisory relationship supported in previous research. Facilitative conditions, such as unconditional positive regard, empathic understanding, and willingness to be known, are important to the development of both supervisory and counseling relationships (Borders & Brown, 2005). Additionally, the strength of the working alliance, comprising agreement on supervisory goals, agreement on supervisory tasks, and quality of the interpersonal bond, has been related to client (e.g., Bambling, King, Raue, Schweitzer, & Lambert, 2006; Patton & Kivlighan, 1997) and supervisee (e.g., Ladany, Ellis, & Friedlander, 1999; Renfro-Michel & Sheperis, 2009) outcomes. Furthermore, we hypothesized that mindfulness would be associated with session dynamics of *depth*, the perceived power and value of a supervision session, and *smoothness*, the comfort and pleasantness of a supervision session (Stiles & Snow, 1984). Although mindfulness and session dynamics have not been investigated to date, the definition of mindfulness suggested to us that more mindful supervisors and supervisees might achieve greater depth in their sessions.

Method

Participants

Participants (N = 144) were 72 pairs of supervisors and supervisees who had completed at least three individual supervision sessions during their current supervision experience. We specified a minimum of three completed sessions to allow for at least an initial development of the supervisory relationship. The 17 degree programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) were diverse in geographic location, university size, and public/private status and were located in three Association for Counselor Education and Supervision regions: North Atlantic (n = 4), Southern (n = 11), and Rocky Mountain (n = 2).

Supervisors were predominantly women (n = 51, 70.8%) and ranged in age from 26 to 70 years (M = 39.29, SD = 12.40). They included doctoral students (n = 20), faculty members (n = 32), adjunct faculty members (n = 11), and unreported (n = 9). We created a three-item self-report questionnaire aimed at understanding the supervisors' current mindfulness practice. Over half of the supervisors endorsed that they currently engaged in mindfulness practice (n = 40, 55.6%), intentionally developed their mindfulness skills (n = 42, 58.3%), and worked in programs that encourage mindfulness in counseling (n = 37, 51.4%).

Supervisees also were predominantly women (n = 65, 90.3%); they ranged in age from 22 to 56 years (M = 29.93, SD = 9.80) and included 1st-year (n = 11) and 2nd-year master's students (n =

56) and unreported (*n* = 5). About half of the supervisees were receiving supervision for practicum (*n* = 37, 51.4%); the rest were enrolled in internship (*n* = 33, 45.8%) or unreported (*n* = 2, 2.8%). We did not assess supervisees' mindfulness practice.

Variables

Mindfulness. The Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ; Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006) provides a global measure of five facets (subscales) of mindfulness: Observe (noticing a variety of stimuli), Describe (applying words to observation), Act With Awareness (giving full attention to one's present activity), Nonjudge (avoiding the evaluation of observations), and Nonreact (noticing without reacting). Participants use a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *rarely/never* to 5 = *often/always*) to respond to the 39-item self-report survey. Baer et al. (2008) confirmed the five-factor hierarchical structure and found support for the measure's construct validity, including significant correlations with measures of meditation experience, personality traits, and psychological symptoms in expected directions. In addition, the five facets predicted psychological well-being. Baer et al. reported alpha coefficients of .72 to .92 across all samples for all facets except for nonreacting to inner experience in the student group (*r* = .37); they did not report alphas for total scores. In the current study, the Cronbach's alphas for total scores were .88 for supervisors and .89 for supervisees.

Supervisory relationship. The supervisory relationship was operationalized through two constructs: facilitative conditions and working alliance. Facilitative conditions were measured by the Barrett–Lennard Relationship Inventory for Supervisory Relationships (BLI; Schacht, Howe, & Berman, 1988), a 40-item self-report survey, using a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = *I strongly feel it is not true* to 6 = *I strongly feel it is true*). The five subscales of the BLI match the underlying core relationship conditions of person-centered theory: Regard, Unconditionality, Empathic Understanding, Congruence, and Willingness to Be Known. Schacht et al. (1988) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .92 for the total score and a one-factor solution accounting for 61.1% of the variance. In the current study, the Cronbach's alphas for total scores were .94 for supervisors and .90 for supervisees.

The Working Alliance Inventory for Supervision (Bahrick, 1989) is an adaptation of the Working Alliance Inventory (WAI) developed by Horvath and Greenberg (1989). The WAI was designed to measure the strength of the counseling relationship based on Bordin's (1979, 1980) theory that the alliance between counselor and client is collaborative and includes three aspects: agreement on goals, agreement on tasks, and quality of the interpersonal bond. The WAI-Supervision is composed of two parallel forms, one for supervisor and one for supervisee, and consists of 36 statements rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 7 = *always*). Bhat and Davis (2007) reported alpha coefficients of .93 for the composite score and for the subscales as follows: Task (.83), Bond (.74), and Goal (.87). Bahrick (1989) found that raters had high agreement on Bond statements (97.6%) but lower agreement on Task (64.0%) and Goal (60.0%) statements. She suggested that the instrument consisted of two factors: Bond and Task/Goal. In light of this finding, we used the composite score. The Cronbach's alphas for total scores for the current study were .93 for supervisors and .95 for supervisees.

Session dynamics. The Session Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ), originally developed by Stiles and Snow (1984) to measure counselor and client perspectives of the impact of the counseling session, has been used effectively with supervision sessions (Stiles, Gordon, & Lani, 2002). The SEQ measures two dimensions of session evaluation, depth and smoothness, and two dimensions of postsession mood, positivity and arousal. It was normed on a sample of counseling graduate students (n = 17) and their clients (n = 72) who rated 942 counseling sessions. Stiles and Snow reported factor-analytic studies that confirmed all four dimensions as underlying session ratings by the counselors and their clients. Internal consistency has been high for all four SEQ dimensions across a wide variety of conditions and settings; .90 for depth, .93 for smoothness, .90 for positivity, and .81 for arousal (Reynolds et al., 1996).

In this study, we used only the two independent evaluative dimensions of depth and smoothness to evaluate participants' most recent supervision session. We believed the two dimensions addressing postsession mood and emotion were less relevant to the focus of supervision versus counseling sessions. Participants rated 11 items arranged in a 7-point semantic differential format. The Cronbach's alphas for the current study for supervisors were .72 for depth and .77 for smoothness; for supervisees, the Cronbach's alphas were .79 for depth and .84 for smoothness.

Procedure

Following approval from the institutional review board, the first author contacted faculty known to her who were affiliated with CACREP-accredited programs across the United States. Seventeen faculty members agreed to be data collectors for their programs. They distributed 150 research packets containing the informed consent, a demographic questionnaire with questions about participants' mindfulness practice, and copies of the aforementioned measures. Participants responded based on their perceptions during their last supervision session. Faculty contacts collected completed questionnaires and informed consents separately to protect confidentiality and returned them to the first author. No identifying information was recorded on the measures; instead, paired questionnaires were marked with a random number (e.g., 001) and a letter to designate supervisor (A) or supervisee (B). Of the 150 packets distributed, 72 pairs were returned for a 48% response rate.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive and inferential statistics for all variables are reported in Table 1. In general, both supervisors and supervisees indicated fairly strong endorsement of their own mindfulness practice and their programs' support of mindfulness, strong supervisory relationships, and relatively high ratings of session depth and smoothness. For descriptive purposes, paired-samples t tests were conducted to compare the mean scores of supervisors and supervisees on each variable. Test values and associated significance levels are reported in Table 1. Family-wise error rates were controlled by using the Benjamini–Hochberg test (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995; Williams, Jones, & Tukey, 1999). Supervisors' mindfulness scores were significantly higher than supervisees' scores on the total FFMQ score (Cohen's d = 0.84) and all five mindfulness

subscales (Observe, Cohen's d = 0.37; Describe, Cohen's d = 0.54; Nonjudge, Cohen's d = 0.53; Nonreact, Cohen's d = 0.73; and Act With Awareness, Cohen's d = 0.49). In contrast, supervisees rated the relationship significantly higher on both constructs: total facilitative conditions (Cohen's d = 0.43) and total working alliance scores (Cohen's d = 0.54). In terms of session dynamics, no significant differences were found between supervisors and supervisees on SEQ Depth, $t(71) = -1.40$, $p = .166$, or SEQ Smoothness, $t(71) = 0.01$, $p = .993$.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and t Tests of Supervisor and Supervisee Scores on Mindfulness, Working Alliance, Session Dynamics, and Facilitative Conditions

	Supervisor (*n* = 72)		**Supervisee (*n* = 72)**					
Measure/Variable	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***t* Test**	***p***	**Index**	**B-H Critical**
FFMQ	3.82	0.32	3.54	0.35	4.70	.000	10	.005[a]
Observe	3.60	0.62	3.38	0.57	2.35	.021	5	.010[a]
Describe	4.08	0.43	3.80	0.61	3.09	.003	8	.006[a]
Nonjudge	4.08	0.54	3.80	0.52	2.88	.005	6	.008[a]
Nonreact	3.61	0.44	3.25	0.54	3.97	.000	9	.006[a]
Act With Awareness	3.73	0.46	3.51	0.43	3.07	.003	7	.007[a]
BLI (facilitative conditions)	4.81	0.41	5.01	0.52	−2.75	.007	2	.025[a]
WAI-Supervision (working alliance)	5.84	0.51	6.13	0.57	−3.08	.003	1	.050[a]
SEQ								
Depth	5.35	0.83	5.51	0.85	−1.40	.166	3	.017
Smoothness	5.66	0.83	5.66	1.17	0.01	.993	4	.013

1. Note. B-H Critical = the p value for the Benjamini–Hochberg (B-H) test used for determining significance; FFMQ = Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire; BLI = Barrett–Lennard Relationship Inventory for Supervisory Relationships; WAI-Supervision = Working Alliance Inventory for Supervision; SEQ = Session Evaluation Questionnaire.
2. [a]The p value for the B-H test was significant.

Main Analyses

We conducted a multivariate regression analysis to test whether the mindfulness of the supervisor and supervisee predicted the four supervision variables: facilitative conditions, working alliance, and the session dynamics ratings of depth and smoothness. This analysis was chosen to incorporate the dyadic nature of the data; both supervisors' and supervisees' levels of mindfulness were included as predictor variables. Supervisors' ratings of mindfulness were a significant predictor of the supervision variables, $\Lambda = .72$, $F(8, 62) = 2.99$, $p = .002$. In contrast, supervisees' ratings of mindfulness were not a significant predictor of the supervision variables, $\Lambda = .86$, $F(8, 63) = 0.81$, $p = .30$. Multicollinearity had no impact on these analyses, with a variance inflation factor (VIF) of 1.02 (tolerance = .98) for each predictor. Because there are two predictors, the same VIF and tolerance values apply to both predictors. A post hoc power

analysis on the supervisees' ratings of mindfulness revealed observed power of .52. This result reflects that if the general trend of results held, a small increase in sample size may have resulted in a significant finding. However, post hoc power analysis must always be interpreted with caution. Inherent in the finding of nonsignificance is an admission that the effect cannot be confidently differentiated from 0. Using those nonsignificant findings in a power analysis does not incorporate that uncertainty about estimated effects.

We conducted follow-up univariate analyses for each supervisor mindfulness result. Mindfulness of the supervisor was a significant predictor of the following variables as rated by the supervisor: facilitative conditions, $F(1, 70) = 5.77$, $p = .019$, adjusted $R^2 = .06$, b = .28; working alliance, $F(1, 70) = 11.63$, $p = .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .13$, $\beta = .38$; and session depth, $F(1, 70) = 7.99$, $p = .063$, adjusted $R^2 = .09$, $\beta = .32$. Mindfulness of the supervisor was not a significant predictor of session smoothness as rated by the supervisor, $F(1, 70) = 0.02$, $p = .88$, observed power of .05; and the supervisee, $F(1, 70) = 0.05$, $p = .82$, observed power of .06. In addition, mindfulness of the supervisor was not a significant predictor of the following variables as rated by the supervisee: facilitative conditions, $F(1, 70) = 1.48$, $p = .23$, observed power of .22; working alliance, $F(1, 70) = 0.19$, $p = .66$, observed power of .07; and session depth, $F(1, 70) = 0.90$, $p = .35$, observed power of .15. In all cases, the caveats described earlier that are associated with interpreting observed power apply to these analyses as well.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship of supervisors' and supervisees' mindfulness with several key supervisory relationship and session dynamics variables. Results indicated that, in general, supervisors' self-ratings of mindfulness were predictive of the supervision variables but supervisees' self-ratings of mindfulness were not. However, supervisors' mindfulness ratings were predictive only of their own ratings of the supervisory relationship (both constructs) and session depth. The more mindful the supervisors, the more they perceived offering person-centered facilitative conditions to supervisees; having higher agreement on supervision goals, tasks, and bonds; and achieving more depth and power in the supervision work.

The finding that supervisors' ratings of mindfulness were not linked to supervisees' ratings of the supervisory relationship stands in contrast with several previous studies. Greason and Welfare (2013) found that counselors' mindfulness was linked to clients' perceptions of the counseling working alliance. Perhaps differences in the two fields—with supervision necessarily more educational and evaluative—and developmental characteristics of new counselors (Borders & Brown, 2005) help explain the contrasting results. Anxious and self-focused, beginning supervisees might be expected to be less mindful than their supervisors, as found in this study, and perhaps less susceptible to the influence of their supervisors' mindfulness behaviors during supervision. Dependent on their supervisors, they may be focused instead on the supportive aspects of the relationship (e.g., facilitative conditions) and the supervisor's teaching behaviors (e.g., agreement on tasks, goals), which they rated significantly higher than did their supervisors. Also, White and Queener (2003) found that supervisors' attachment scores were predictive of both supervisors' and supervisees' perceptions of the working alliance. However, attachment is a

personality construct whereas mindfulness is a behavioral construct, which may help to explain the different results here. Similarly, supervisees' mindfulness scores did not predict the supervision variables. Across these studies, then, results seem to suggest that supervisor characteristics may have more influence on some key supervision process variables than do supervisee characteristics.

Both supervisors' and supervisees' ratings of facilitative conditions and the working alliance were significantly correlated: supervisor, $r(70) = .70$, $p < .05$, and supervisee, $r(70) = .75$, $p < .05$, suggesting they saw these supervisory components as similar. However, the two groups' ratings were not correlated with each other: working alliance, $r(70) = -.06$, and facilitative conditions, $r(70) = .15$. One explanation for this finding is that supervisors and supervisees are attuned to different aspects of the relationship, which led to low agreement in constructs. For example, the construct of task (e.g., learn a skill) may be vitally important to the student supervisee, whereas the supervisor may be focused on the construct of bond. This difference could reflect the roles each has in the relationship, as well as the developmental level. More exploration of what is valued by each within the relationship could be fruitful. Furthermore, data were collected after (at least) three individual sessions; perhaps the relationship constructs would be correlated across participants if data had been collected later in the semester. Additionally, both relationship measures were borrowed from the counseling literature and may not measure key relationships variables in supervision. The supervisory relationship is more complex than the counseling relationship because of the evaluative dimension, and thus more challenging to measure (Borders, 2005). Lizzio, Wilson, and Que (2009) proposed supervisory relationship dynamics of supervisor openness, support, and challenge as key variables; these may provide additional relationship constructs to explore in future supervision research, including their relationship with session dynamics, mindfulness, and other person-based variables.

As outlined earlier, collecting dyadic data allowed us to examine the constructs multidimensionally, from the perspectives of the supervisor and the supervisee in the same relationship. As a result, we were able to examine the combination of perspectives of both supervisors and supervisees with regard to the supervision variables. In addition, the paired nature of the data collection ensured that participants were rating the same relationships, which strengthens the accuracy of the results.

Limitations

The use of nonrandom, convenience sampling in our study limits generalizability to a larger population, and data were all based on self-report and thus could be susceptible to social desirability. The mean scores on all inventories were fairly high, which may indicate that only those in more positive supervisory relationships decided to participate in the study or that there was a positive response bias across participants. The high means also may have contributed to the lack of significant findings in the Pearson correlation analyses, because of limited variance in scores. In addition, effect sizes were small and power was limited. Finally, this study provided a snapshot of the supervision experience with cross-sectional data of the ratings of one supervision session early in the semester. Longitudinal perspectives could further illuminate how

participants' mindfulness influences the development of the supervisory relationship as well as variations in session dynamics of depth and smoothness across time.

Implications for Supervisory Practice and Future Research

Results of this study, when integrated with previous mindfulness research, suggest mindfulness training for both supervisees and supervisors might be helpful. For supervisees, mindfulness training is valuable in managing the stress and anxiety of their counseling programs, developing greater empathy and compassion, enhancing their therapeutic presence with clients, and increasing their counselor self-efficacy. For supervisors, more mindful supervisors form stronger supervisory relationships and achieve greater depth in their supervision sessions, at least from their perspective. Our understanding of the impact of mindfulness on supervision, however, is incomplete, especially from the supervisee's perspective. Future researchers interested in exploring the impact of mindfulness on the supervisory relationship are encouraged to study supervisory relationships at later time points than studied here and, perhaps more important, study the connections between mindfulness and relationship variables over time, because neither the supervisory relationship nor mindfulness is a static variable. Intensive case studies might be particularly helpful in shedding light on the longitudinal relationships among mindfulness, supervisory relationship, and supervision processes. Researchers also could explore the impact of mindfulness on other supervision processes (e.g., evaluation), other relationship dynamics (e.g., supervisee resistance), and its role in other supervision modalities such as group and peer supervision.

Increased attention to supervisor characteristics also seems warranted, because our results and those of White and Queener (2003) suggested that supervisors' characteristics may have more influence on some key supervision variables than do supervisees' characteristics. Ladany (2004; also see Ladany & Muse-Burke, 2001) suggested a long list of potentially relevant supervisor (and supervisee) characteristics to explore. In addition, we encourage researchers to collect dyadic data, using paired rather than nonpaired groups of supervisors and supervisees, to allow investigation of potential interactions of supervisor and supervisee characteristics.

Future researchers may want to look at mindfulness subscales, although the sample was too small to do so here. The highest rated subscales by both supervisors and supervisees were the Describe and Nonjudge subscales; therefore, researchers may investigate these subscales further in a larger sample size. More specifically, the Describe subscale could provide the basis for the techniques of reflection and empathic statements; supervisors and supervisees who rate this subscale higher may be more adept in these areas. The Nonjudge subscale has always been a cornerstone of the counseling field and effective clinical practice; this is a concept that supervisors will be emphasizing with their supervisees during their clinical experiences. These two constructs are foundational to counselor training, which may indicate why they were rated highest by both participants. Finally, it would be important to investigate whether the mindfulness of either person contributes to changes or growth in supervisees' counseling effectiveness and skill development, measured quantitatively, as well as relevant outcomes for supervisees' clients.

Conclusion

Mindfulness as a construct has much affiliation with counselor training and counseling practice, including the supervision context. We hope this study will encourage counselors, including student counselors, to explore the relevance of mindfulness for themselves personally and professionally, and will provide counselor educators a starting point for further research on the contributions of mindfulness to the education and supervision of counseling students.

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